

Spirituality
in
Social
Work

New Directions

Edward R. Canda
Editor



Spirituality in Social Work: New Directions

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Spirituality in Social Work: New Directions

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Edward R. Canda, PhD, is Associate Professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas. He has been a Fulbright Scholar and a Korea Foundation Fellow for the study of East Asian philosophy and religion in South Korea. In 1990, Dr. Canda founded the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, for which he now serves on the Board of Directors. He has published more than 30 articles and book chapters on connections between spiritual diversity, culture, and social work. His forthcoming book *Contemporary Human Behavior Theory: A Critical Perspective for Social Work* (co-authored with Susan Robbins, PhD, and Pranab Chatterjee, PhD) integrates content on spirituality, religion, and transpersonal theory throughout each chapter.

Preface

Clearly there is a strong movement afoot among Americans to re-integrate religious ritual and spiritual affirmation back into their daily lives. In some cases this movement takes on the familiar face of the traditional, while for others it finds new expression. The popular media reports that Americans are predominantly theistic, attend religious services regularly, and find spirituality to be very important in their lives. Americans are re-embracing their traditional Judeo-Christian roots. Television is successfully launching prime-time shows with strong Christian content such as *Touched by an Angel* and *Nothing Sacred*. This profile of Americans as believers is not necessarily new, given that the founding fathers (and mothers) of this country placed their trust in God. What is new is the myriad forms of acceptable spiritual expression now embraced by Americans. On the brink of a new millennium and with global telecommunications at their fingertips, ancient wisdom and traditions of the East have been readily adopted by much of the American public. *Time* magazine featured an issue on *America's Fascination with Buddhism* (October, 1997) citing two recently released motion pictures, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, as supporting evidence. Thus, it seems, according to the *New York Times Magazine* (December 7, 1997) special issue *God Decentralized*, that "Americans are still among the most religious people on the planet. But these days, they're busy inventing unorthodox ways to get where they're going." If it is true that the mass media has a finger on the collective pulse of America, then it is clear that whether Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim or, as one contributor to the issue wrote, "Alone in a lofty place," Americans are expressing their overwhelming interest in spiritual matters.

Social work, with its holistic focus on person-in-environment, has long acknowledged the importance of mind, body, spirit integration. Social workers in hospice and healthcare settings have been among the first in the

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profession to explore the significance of religious/spiritual belief as a means of relieving psychological distress in the face of life-threatening illness and death. Mental health social workers have been close on their heels with models of practice that include elements of spiritual/religious interventions such as meditation, acknowledging a higher power, spiritual meaning-making, Buddhist ego-disattachment and the existential act of confronting one's mortality. While many of these clinical models have been in use for a number of years, the viability of treating the individual's spiritual health is just recently being openly accepted. Transpersonal experiences such as visions, out-of-body experiences, and psychic phenomena are no longer necessarily viewed as pathological, but are now considered within the realm of possibility and worthy of research. In fact, empirical studies evaluating the efficacy of such experiences, as well as spiritual interventions, are now being funded.

Given this post-modern context for social work practice of multiple spiritual realities, the profession faces a profound clinical challenge. It must assist its clientele in addressing the specific subjectivity of religious/spiritual values, while remaining value-free and objective. It must develop explanatory and change theories, as well as models of practice, that address the particularity of belief without adopting belief. All of this must be done in the spirit of inclusion and within the context of client self-determination, the hallmark values of social work.

This collection dedicated to Spirituality and Social Work is a landmark volume. It is the first of its kind to bring together the cutting-edge themes of spirituality and social work from the perspective of social work academics and practitioners alike. It offers the reader a glimpse into the future of social work where the spiritual is fully integrated with the physical, psychological, and social aspects of the individual, and worthy of professional attention. The authors that have contributed to this volume are sensitized to the inextricable nature of spirituality as a defining aspect of each individual. In their writings they are attempting to shed light on what social work practice in this realm looks like and what it will mean for the future development of the profession.

As Vice-President of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, and as Editor of *Social Thought*, I am one of many who are participating in the social work response to the American spiritual/religious movement. This response will take us well into the twenty-first century and define our practice for the new millennium. With the reading of this issue, you may join in that response.

Elizabeth D. Smith

Foreword

It is my pleasure to serve as editor for *Spirituality in Social Work: New Directions*. This volume is very timely because of the rapid increase of interest in the topic of spirituality among social work educators and practitioners discussed by the authors. Many social workers are seeking guidance for how to address the religious and spiritual aspects of people's lives while respecting and appreciating the diverse and sometimes conflicting expressions of spirituality for individuals and communities. In response, the contributors to this collection present an overview of the connection between spirituality and social work, including its current status and possibilities for continuing innovation and exploration.

The authors are all active within the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, which supports the development of approaches to social work practice, theory, research, policy, and education that are respectful of spirituality's diverse religious and nonreligious forms. I founded this society in 1990 and transferred the Society's activity to publish refereed articles on spirituality to *Social Thought* in 1994. Now, under the directorship of Robin Russel, the Society for Spirituality and Social Work is active in producing a newsletter, presenting local and national conferences, networking internationally, and advocating for spiritual awareness in all aspects of the profession.¹ We in the Society would like to give special appreciation and support to *Social Thought* with Joseph Shields as past editor, and Elizabeth Smith as current editor, for its important role in disseminating scholarship on spirituality and social services.

The first two articles give an overview of the current state of connection between spirituality and social work scholarship and education. Maria Carroll presents a critical review of conceptualizations of spirituality in the social work literature and highlights implications for theory and practice. Her article reinforces the important distinction between spirituality as a

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fundamental, universal quality of the human being and its manifestation in religious or nonreligious contexts. She also draws out the significance for human development of integrating spirituality as the essence of human nature together with spirituality as one dimension of human experience. Robin Russel presents an analysis of the way spirituality is presently taught within MSW programs. She documents the rapid increase of specialized courses on this topic, reflecting recent attention given to religious and spiritual diversity in the Council on Social Work Education's Curriculum Policy Statement as well as general trends in our society and profession.

The next two articles present innovations in social work practice and education that draw on previously neglected resources for personal and professional spiritual insight. Barbara Luoma advocates for the inclusion of training that can enhance the intuition of social workers. She points out that practitioners have long recognized practice wisdom and intuition as critical ingredients in successful helping, but that related skills have rarely been addressed in coursework or training programs. A study of students in her own courses demonstrates their strong interest in this topic and the need to address it in education. Terry Koenig and Rick Spano explore insights from Taoism for enhancing a strengths perspective on social work practice. Taoism is an ancient Chinese spiritual tradition that honors intuition and spontaneous creativity and guides us to move beyond dichotomous thinking and alienated ways of relating to the world.

Barbara Early presents a clinical application of the Transegoic model with a dying adolescent. In her in-depth case study, she addresses her young client's psychospiritual issues through his dream images. Next, Lawrence Ressler directs our attention to the importance of spirituality for macro level social work practice and policy development. He discusses the historical and continuing tensions between church and state that impact social services delivered through sectarian religious auspices. His article illuminates the special dilemmas that arise when spiritual beliefs and practices related to helping are linked to religious institutions and community support systems. In the final article, I provide suggestions for future efforts to link spirituality to social work by drawing on the issues and recommendations raised by the previous authors.

The Society for Spirituality and Social Work has sponsored three national conferences (1995, 1996 and 1997), the themes of which summarize well the status of connection between spirituality and social work. The first conference theme was "Retrieving the Soul of Social Work," emphasizing the profession's recovery of its heritage of spiritual perspectives and commitments beginning in the mid-1980s. The second conference theme